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# Parliament and the Consumer

By A. V. ALEXANDER, M.P.

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### THE CONTRIBUTORS.

Mr. A. V. Alexander, who has already held office as Parliamentary Secretary to the Board of Trade, is looked upon as a coming man in politics. The son of a West Country engineer, before the war he was on the staff of the Education Committee of the Somerset County Council; after the war he left the army, with the honorary rank of captain, to come to the front as Co-operative M.P. for the Hillsborough Division of Sheffield and secretary to the Parliamentary Committee of the Co-operative Congress. In all Parliamentary matters affecting consumers he has established himself as a chief authority.

SELF AND SOCIETY

# Parliament and the Consumer

by A. V. Alexander, M.P.

*Secretary to the Parliamentary Committee  
of the Co-operative Congress*

Thomas J. Duff  
TRENT UNIVERSITY  
PETERBOROUGH, ONTARIO

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# Parliament and the Consumer

## I.

### How Parliament has Developed.

OUR British Parliament has long since become a model for other countries' representative systems, and the story of its evolution is a fascinating one, which it is not possible to trace here at length. The outstanding fact is, however, that even in the days when our country was familiar with the despotism of monarchs there was always a national assembly of some sort destined to have far-reaching effects upon the daily life of the people, their industry, trade, social welfare and outlook, and their international relationships. From the Witenagemot to the Great Council, and on by way of Magna Charta to the bicameral Parliament of later time, there was a continuous struggle, from which was evolved the representative system of Parliamentary government as we know it to-day.

Running through the whole of the conflicts which produced our Parliament, we may find two principles constantly to the fore and acted upon, viz., no taxation without representation, and territorial or district representation. Long before Magna Charta the

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King's officers dealt with financial matters by meeting the recognitors of the grand assize and deputies sent by the boroughs, and these may well be regarded as the forerunners of the county and borough members. This territorial representation was the basis of the De Montfort Parliament of 1265, in the election of which the sheriffs were required by writ to return two knights from each shire, two citizens from each city, and two burgesses from each borough.

Such territorial representation no doubt came spontaneously and conveniently, because originally each area was, to a very great extent, self-contained. This condition has, of course, largely passed away. The division of labour between town and town, between town and country, and between districts wide apart, has developed to such an extent that the old claim for territorial representation has really disappeared. The principle is still recognised, however, in county and borough representation, modified by considerations of population as a result of the fight during the last two centuries for electoral reform and the consequent wide extension of the franchise. With the allocation of seats in Parliament in some ratio to population as well as to territory, there has been some growth in the idea that a Member of Parliament is elected not so much as the representative of the particular interests of his constituency, but as a national representative of the general interests of the population as a whole.

Side by side with these electoral changes, however, there have been tremendous changes of another

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character as a result of the industrial revolution. With the growth of industry, commerce, and organised finance, Parliamentary discussions and legislation have been more and more concerned with these questions and with social issues arising from the same cause. Consequently, it is, perhaps, not to be wondered at that Parliament to-day is very largely composed of persons who, whilst nominally representing constituencies on a territorial and population basis, are, in fact, representative of the many and varied interests likely to be affected in the legislation of an industrial and commercial nation.

One of these interests has always been very well represented, namely, that of the land. This representation dates back to the times of the earliest Parliaments, when the feudal landowners were called together to act for their districts. Many members of the present House of Lords trace their descent back to the feudal barons, and, indeed, as adequately embody landed interests to-day as did their medieval ancestors. Moreover, this power of land ownership has been almost equally well served in the House of Commons, partly because of the subservience until recent times of the agricultural labourer to the local squire or lord of the manor and his politically minded sons and nephews.

The law, also, has been connected with Parliament and politics from the time of the earliest Parliaments. The various law societies and solicitors' societies have always included in their membership a number of



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Members of Parliament, and incidentally, it may be said, they have succeeded in making and keeping the profession of the law a "closed corporation." The law, perhaps more than any other profession, is represented in Parliament by young men ambitious for careers. Their names as Members of Parliament are brought into the public eye, and unpaid advocacy may lead to more lucrative employment. Many brilliant lawyers first made a name in Parliament, and some of our most famous statesmen, past and present, have at one time been engaged in some branch of the legal profession, sometimes, to their credit, surrendering golden fees for public service and the relatively modest income of a Minister of the Crown. Generally speaking, too, politics has some reward to give to lawyers in employment in Crown cases, and in such remunerative advancement as may be found in appointments as law officers of the Crown, or even the summit of all lawyers' ambition, the seat of the Lord Chancellor on the Woolsack.

There has always been a fairly strong representation in the House of Commons of the regular fighting services, but this becomes less marked as the number of Members with predominantly trading and financial interests increases. It is very much to be doubted whether the general public realise the extent to which this latter class of representation has grown. There are well over two hundred directors of public companies with seats in the House of Commons, these companies covering very wide powers in finance, banking, insurance, shipping, general manufacture,



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mining, and the like. If the figures of this class of representation are put another way there are between seven and eight hundred directorships of over six hundred companies held by Members of Parliament, and it is not uncommon in these days for a Member of Parliament, speaking in the House, to refer directly to the company which he represents as being interested in the matter before the House. In later years the growth of the political labour movement, based very largely upon the organised trade unions, has led to the inclusion in Parliament of a large number of Members who may be said to directly represent the interests of the trade unions. This was not accomplished without a great deal of agitation and strenuous political fighting; though that fight was first of all engendered through the natural revolt against the vicious prosecutions and sentences under the Combination Laws, and it was many years before the trade union movement adopted an open policy of sending direct representatives to Parliament. The socialist agitation, more especially that led by the late Keir Hardie, had a good deal to do with the change of attitude, and the legal decision in the Taff Vale case was of great influence in the large increase in the membership of the Labour Representation Committee, mainly based on trade unionism. The Osborne judgment of 1909 may be said to have been responsible for the miners' union joining the organisation for Labour representation, and the 1913 Trade Union Act made increasing representation of this character actually possible.

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From some points of view this representation of interests is not altogether without advantage. Not only is a considerable proportion of our modern legislation directly concerned with finance, industry, and commerce, but even legislation of a more general or social character must always fall to be examined from the point of view as to what the economic effect of such legislation will be upon our financial and trading position generally, and it is hardly to be wondered at in the circumstances that important business influences have sought direct power in Parliament from that point of view. Similarly, one can well understand that organised trade unions who have found themselves handicapped in their defence of labour by legislation and Government administration should desire to remedy that position by seeking equal representation in Parliament with the leaders of industry.

### II.

#### **Sectional Interests and the Common Interest.**

Careful consideration of the structure of society as it is to-day must inevitably lead to the conclusion that the largest interest of all to be considered and safeguarded is that of the people as consumers.

It is evident from a study of our English history that the consumers' interest was by no means overlooked in the Middle Ages. Our ancestors of that day regarded as essential an ample supply of pure food. Every town had its Assize of Bread and Ale, which

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fixed standards of quality, measures, and, in most cases, price, and there is a record that the Government of 1266 issued an Act which enforced the local assizes and fixed a general price.

In those days the view was held that there was a "just price" for commodities which would ensure an honest living to the producer, that you were not justified in compelling the people to pay more for necessities in time of scarcity, and that no commercial crimes equalled those of the forestaller and regrator. To corner or forestall the market by buying supplies before they reached it, or by purchasing large quantities to sell at a higher price (or regrating), was the last stage of commercial immorality (*Economic History of England*—Waters).

Salzmann, in the *English Industries of the Middle Ages*, says: "The economist of that period had not grasped the fact that cleverness shown in buying an article cheap and selling the same thing, without any further expenditure of labour, dear, if done on a sufficiently large scale, justifies the bestowal of the honour of knighthood or a peerage." This sarcasm illustrates that there is a fairly widespread belief that the interest of the people as consumers is not nearly as well recognised relatively in the present generation as in the days of the Middle Ages. It may well be that, in the tremendous increase in the number of separate industrial and financial problems which are now dealt with by our Parliament and Government institutions, the consumer has come to be overlooked because of the general nature of his case.

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Discussions in Parliament tend to centre round the particular interest or the particular section of the community in respect of which for the time being legislation is proposed. Moreover, generally speaking, the present-day conception of society, with its system of production for private profit and its lack of any organised or scientific attempt to relate consumption to production, has resulted in the continuous neglect of the consumer.

The condition of the working class since the industrial revolution has given general concern to large numbers of people of goodwill, but, in the main, the efforts to improve that condition have been along the line of raising the economic position of groups of producers as such, rather than organising general and continuous reforms which would improve the *real* purchasing power of the working-class consumers as a whole. Thus we see, side by side with the growth of the co-operative consumers' movement in the nineteenth century, a great deal of special energy devoted to creating varied and diverse co-operative associations of producers. Nevertheless, it may be said that all these efforts, including the quite modern guild movement, have failed, with the exception of those associations of producers which have moved to direct association with organised consumers. Most valuable work, of course, has been done by trade unions to protect the general standard of living of the worker, but, because of the fact that the interest of the consumer has been so universally overlooked, the improvements secured by organised producers have

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very largely been swallowed up by increased prices. There has been set up a vicious circle, in which increased monetary wages are always pursuing, but rarely overtaking, general prices to the consumer. Gradual recognition of this feature of our industrial and social life was undoubtedly a factor in the movement of organised labour into the political arena.

We thus have represented in Parliament the landlord, the lawyer, the regular fighting services, the financier, the industrialist, and the organised producers. All these representatives, while public-spirited probably above the average, naturally are not blind to particular interests with which they are definitely connected.

In January, 1922, *Public Opinion* quoted Dean E. A. Burroughs as saying that "to-day it is the spirit of the section which is everywhere rampant again—the defiant fragment claiming to act as if it were the whole." With the possible exception of the trade union representation, however (since the latter are so directly concerned with the purchasing power of wages and the housing and other conditions of the masses), these members can hardly be said ever conspicuously to stand for what is, after all, the widest interest in the State, namely, the general interests of the people as consumers. Even in the case of trade union representation it is only natural that the direct claims of the particular industry covered by a trade union looms much larger in the vision of its representatives than the much wider and general and diffused affairs of the consumer as a whole. It would

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be very unfair to say that the Members of Parliament who are connected with any of these large interests never have the public good in view, but it is to be feared that when their particular and special branch of business is under discussion their vision of the public welfare is inclined to fade out of sight until their immediate object has been attained. Perhaps no more potent example of this could be found than the attitude of the Parliament of 1918-1922 towards the Reports of the Committees which conducted certain investigations under the Central Profiteering Act, and to the exploitation of the consumers of the country during the period of the great war and the immediate post-war years. To have put the recommendations contained in these Reports into effect would have cut across so many interests which were directly represented in Parliament that nothing was done.

In recent years, however, the case of the consumer and his claim for consideration have been increasingly pressed upon the "powers that be." Profiteering and exploitation during the great war led to the setting up of a body known as the Consumers' Council, and since the war there has been such a clamour at the general neglect of the consumer's position that we have seen in succession the establishment of such bodies as the Royal Commission on Food Prices, the Food Council, the Departmental Committee on the Prices of Building Materials, and so on. The growing influence of the co-operative consumers' movement in the country has been a very considerable factor in this modern development.



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In common with the trade union movement, organised consumers were comparatively slow in recognising the value of political representation as a means of safeguarding their general interests and furthering their ideals. This tardiness probably arose from a number of causes. The industrial co-operative movement progressed quietly, almost unnoticed by economists, statesmen, and Government alike. Even in current books on the industrial system by prominent sociologists and economists the influence of this huge consumers' movement upon the lives of the people and upon the trade and prosperity of the country is still either overlooked or dismissed in a very short reference. Moreover, in its early years the consumers' movement did not arouse the same measure of hatred and persecution as that experienced by the trade union movement, because the established traders in the country regarded it with what might almost be described as contempt, but certainly with pitying tolerance. There were occasions when representations from the consumers' movement to Parliament were necessary, and these were made through individual Members of Parliament of various parties.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, however, the widespread growth of the consumers' movement and its encroachment upon the field of trade formerly completely held by private interests resulted in such active political opposition that in 1902 the Joint Parliamentary Committee of the Co-operative Congress was instituted for defending its general interests. Their experiences at the hands of Parliament and



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Government departments led to continuous agitation for direct representation, which, however, did not materialise until the organised consumers were brought up against the effect of the entrenchment of trading interests in Parliament as against the interest of the consumer. In 1917 a decision was made at the Co-operative Congress that year to seek direct representation of the consumer in Parliament, and even before any election had transpired this decision led to success in the substantial amelioration of the special difficulties and hardships encountered by the organised consumers' movement in the last years of the war. One representative was secured at the general election of 1918, and further successes were registered, such as the amendment of the Finance Act applying Corporation Profits Tax to the mutual surpluses accruing from co-operative association, and in the passing of the Sale of Tea (Net Weight) Act, which saves some millions a year to the consumers of tea. In 1922 four co-operative members were returned, in 1923 six, and in 1924 five.

That increased representation secured in Parliament up to the present time, coupled with the support of the increased Labour Party (most of whose members in the House of Commons are members of the co-operative consumers' movement), has secured a number of further successes too numerous to mention here, but including drastic amendment in the industrial assurance law, increased representation of the consumers upon Government bodies and commissions, and so on. Even where the objective

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has not always been reached, the case of the consumer and his general defence has been stated with a persistence and an influence not known before. This actual representation in Parliament of the organised consumer for the first time is a much bigger event in the political history of this country than has yet perhaps been realised. The co-operative consumers' movement is itself expressive of the revolt of the consumer against the exploitation of the community by sectional interests, and that it should, after decades of declared neutrality in politics, have taken its stand in the political arena with the object of obtaining Parliamentary representation indicates that a very important section of the community recognises that the general interests of the public have not been properly safeguarded in our national legislation and administration in the past.

### III.

#### **Trusts and the Consumer: A New Situation.**

We have stated that the British Parliament has become a model for other countries' representative systems, and in this country it is true to say that from the sixteenth century there has been a faith in Parliament as an organ of democracy which has deepened with the establishment of a constitutional monarchy and the slow but now full extension of the franchise. In other countries, however, since the war there has been a reaction of a really profound character, resulting in the setting up of more or less

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complete dictatorships, such as those to be found in Italy, Spain, Turkey, Hungary, Yugo-Slavia, &c. There has been some reflex of this position in our own country, and it is common to hear the statement to-day that "democracy and Parliament as the organ of democracy are upon trial." Nothing is more likely to widen and strengthen reaction against Parliamentary institutions than any growth of public opinion that our representative assembly is being used by vested interests for their own advancement and to the detriment of the public weal. Yet there are very grave dangers indeed in any form of dictatorship, even if it assumes to be of a benevolent character. There is a tremendous need at this juncture for educating the people generally and Parliament itself as to the necessity, if democracy is to survive, of submerging particular interests in the general communal good.

The education of the public in this matter must, of course, depend very largely upon the Press, and it is not reassuring to find that large sections of the Press have been acquired in syndicated form by important groups covering other businesses and industries which have their own interests and their own advancement to secure by means of Parliamentary action. The independence and freedom of the Press, traditional to us, have become seriously endangered, though (happily) not yet completely destroyed. It is distressing to find the syndicated ownership of newspapers revealing itself in inspired unanimity of opinion, carried out as much by way of mass production as any modern industrial products. Taken in conjunction

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with the modern tendency to large-scale industrial amalgamations and trustification, with direct representation in Parliament, this may well lead to the destruction of what might almost be called the ancient faith of the British people in our democratic institutions, and might facilitate the establishment of some form of dictatorship, in which the rigid censorship of the Press would make it difficult to re-establish the rights of a free democracy. It would seem, therefore, to be of the utmost importance to recognise the urgent need of the provision of a Press which is not under the heel of sectional interests, and one that can be relied upon to defend the consuming community and continuously to inculcate the desire for, and the will to secure, a democracy with Governmental institutions established upon the firm foundation of the common rights of the people.

If any of us are tempted to doubt the truth of these suggestions, let us remember that defects do not at any time arise without adequate cause. The phenomenal growth of the co-operative consumers' movement and the increasing extent to which the consumers' case is being brought to the fore are really the effect of the recognition of the danger to the consuming community of the enormous development of the power in the political, as well as the industrial and financial, sphere of the trust, the combine, and the cartel. A Report of the Committee on Trusts, issued by the Ministry of Reconstruction in 1919, contained abundant evidence that the growth of the trust and combine was so rapid that it might within no distant period

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exercise a paramount control over all important branches of British trade. The Committee was satisfied that considerable mistrust with regard to the activities of these combines existed in the public mind, and that the effect of such mistrust might be equally hurtful to political and social stability; whilst a minority addendum to the Report declared that capitalist combination now loads in varying degrees the price of practically everything that we purchase, with the result that the consumer cannot be sure that he is charged no more than is required to defray the costs of production and distribution, whilst the wage-earner cannot be convinced that any reduction in expenses which may be effected by labour-saving machinery or other improvements will be reflected in a falling price to the consumers.

This marked tendency to combination and monopoly is of grave import. Monopolies, unless they are publicly owned, rarely prove to be benevolent. At present we have a real bulwark against the possible evil effects of such monopolies, through such trading alternatives as exist by means of the co-operative organisation of consumers, with the possibility, through their increasing activities and developing capitalisation, of providing other means of supply. But it has been made plain, since the point of view of the consumer in these matters has become articulate in Parliament, that there is little hope of any effective Government action to deal with the growing menace of monopolies unless there is increased representation of the consumer in our legislative assembly. Whilst

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we have placed in a prominent position this question of controlling the power of combines and monopolies, the recent trend of events has reinforced the claim for consumers' representation in numerous directions. The growth of the trust and the combine has up till recent years been more marked in other countries than in Great Britain, and has usually been accompanied by protection of their monopoly, as far as possible, through the imposition of high Customs tariffs. It is significant to observe that the development of trade combinations in this country was largely fostered by the artificial restrictions caused by the great war, and that since the war there has been a continuous agitation for the imposition of such tariffs on imported goods as would be likely to bolster up the monopoly of the combinations. The agitation has not been altogether without success, as may be seen from the re-imposition of the war-time duties commonly referred to as the "McKenna Duties," and the gradual extension of import taxes at the high rate of 33½ per cent under the procedure known as "Safeguarding of Industries." In fact, in a country which in relation to its population has won for itself in the world of trade and commerce a pre-eminent position on the basis of free trade, we are now in immediate danger of being subordinated to what would amount to a general tariff.

It is in dealing with such a situation as this that the position of the consumer becomes so important. If every nation could be completely self-contained in production and distribution of the requirements of



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the whole of the community, there might be a case for protective taxation to conserve the standards of life obtained in such a self-contained community; but with the growing division of labour between country and country and the corresponding interdependence of the nations, such a policy is bound to react to the detriment of the consumer. Moreover, a protective fiscal policy must inevitably, in the long run, mean an unfair incidence in the taxation of the subject. Where large portions of the revenue of the State are raised from indirect taxation collected at the time of the purchase of commodities, the old-established principle that taxation should be levied in relation to the ability to pay is bound to be violated; and the gradual but persistent increase in the percentage of our national revenue raised from indirect taxation in the last few years is yet another argument for the need for the extension of the representation of the consumer in Parliament. The old cry of "no taxation without representation" clearly becomes the legitimate watchword of consumers who are at present being mulcted every year in new impositions of taxation upon their daily needs.

### IV.

#### **The Safeguarding of the Consumer.**

Not the least of the causes of the modern agitation for representation of the consumer is the growing recognition of the necessity for State action in the direction of ensuring standards of purity in our food supplies and the establishment of principles of fair



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dealing. In this matter it is right to observe that substantial progress has been made. Legislation of the character of the Truck Acts, the Sale of Food and Drugs Acts, the Milk and Dairies Acts, and the Factories Acts are all indicative of the growth of public opinion; but, although if a British workman of a hundred years ago were to return and reflect upon the changes made since his day he would probably be amazed at the improvements which have taken place, there is still a tremendous amount to be done. Scientific medical research has resulted in the diagnosis of numerous diseases from which mankind suffers, and the establishment at least of some causes of these diseases as being due to foodstuffs and to food factors and habits which are clearly capable of remedy. The consumer in Parliament can and must in the future exercise an important and beneficial influence upon national policy designed to expedite and consolidate the necessary remedial action.

It is, too, of importance that the consumer should establish even more firmly than at present in law the principle laid down in the rules of the Woolwich Co-operative and Provident Society, as far back as 1851, in the plain words "of honesty and fair dealing."

The case of the consumer is not, of course, confined to considerations of food and clothing, but extends to the wider considerations of general social amenities, e.g., it needs little stretch of imagination to realise that every one of the main social services is as capable of being exploited to the detriment of the consuming community as are such bare necessities of life as

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bread or footwear. The needs of the consumer expand with every generation. What was regarded as a luxury by our forebears two or three hundred years ago, comes to be recognised as a necessity in modern life for the maintenance of happiness and health. The advent of the industrial machine and mass production, the mechanical nature of the work of large sections of the population, and the roar and bustle of our streets and our transport systems, constitute a new and growing tax upon the physique and the nervous system of our people. Correctives are not luxuries, but necessities. It is no longer possible to maintain the standard of life of the working-class consumer under old housing conditions, and it is to be expected, therefore, that the organised consumer will make wider housing facilities at reasonable cost and general reform of housing regulations a prominent part of his programme.

It is equally necessary in these modern conditions of life that there should be really adequate provision for recreation. There has now been enormous development in this direction. Forty years ago there was but little opportunity for the mass of the industrial workers either to have the time or the organised opportunities for engaging in such common forms of recreation as football, cricket, tennis, bowls, swimming, and so on. Yet, now, all over the country, a network of open spaces, private and public, is available to at least a large section of the poorer classes of the population as well as the well-to-do. Still there is need of extension, as may be gathered from the agitation for still larger numbers of playing fields for school children,

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as well as for adult workers. It is equally important in the circumstances outlined above of our modern life that there should be ample opportunity for mental recreation as well as physical. No one could say that there has not been development in this direction, but it is largely along the line of more or less "catchy" forms of amusement, provided mainly for the purpose of enhancing the profits of the promoters. Some day the consumer will realise that these new needs of society are of such importance that they must be provided for real use and not for profit, and that with the growth of mass production and the possible shortening thereby of actual hours of industrial labour, the mental recreation of the people must include not only cheap amusement, but a real appreciation of the overwhelming importance of the right use of leisure, with a resultant development of intellectual culture.

And so the case of the consumer includes a demand for more adequate provision for recreation, and for the provision of more and more facilities for the education and mental development of the worker. Unless this object is accomplished there is grave danger in the future that we shall actually deteriorate in the arts and the crafts. Everything to-day seems to move along the lines of mass production. We take our pictures in that way, the wireless and the gramophone regale us with music good and bad, the drama comes to us in potted fashion over the ether, and the variety of our old handicrafts have been substituted by machine production. The one who sees the general

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consumers' case with all the vision that it contains of a larger and fuller life must be expected to be engaged in any agitation which will counteract this danger.

The care of the child, morally as well as physically, are obligations of the organised consumer, equally with the development of the education of the adult, and with all the progress in this country of education since 1870 there is a tremendous amount of leeway to be made up before we can be said to have arrived at the condition of things in which something like equality of opportunity is provided through a free and adequate system of education. It is to the eternal credit of the pioneers of consumers' co-operation in Rochdale eighty-five years ago that they included in their first programme a statement of their determination to deal with education as well as production and distribution. The organised consumers in Great Britain have followed the light in this direction, sometimes with more, sometimes with less, fervour, and it is significant to know that in the development of their agitation for political representation the educational advancement of the people, young and old, finds a prominent place.

One of the most important aspects of the demand of the consumer for political expression is reflected in his recognition of the necessity for removing the economic causes of international strife. The day in which wars between peoples and nations were brought about by the jealousies and the ambitions of monarchs has largely passed away, and for long it has been recognised that the principal causes of war are to be found

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in the desire to control the existing sources of supply and the potential production of food and raw materials, as well as of markets for the sale of the finished products of industry. Economic agreement between peoples is now regarded as essential before there can be any final pact of peace or outlawry of war, and the influence of the organised consumer in promoting this end is already being increasingly felt in international activities. The International Co-operative Alliance, for example, covering thirty-four national organisations, comprising a membership of 50,000,000 people, definitely works for the ideal of complete economic understanding and the direct exchange of goods and services between peoples without let or hindrance. It is significant that this international consumers' organisation is now recognised by the League of Nations, and is afforded the opportunity of conveying the consumers' contribution to discussions and negotiations for the peace of the world. In a society in which capitalist combination is so powerful politically, it is of fundamental importance that the consumers' view on these international questions should be adequately represented in the legislative counsels of the nation, with whom final acceptance or rejection of peace proposals must rest.

Over a hundred years ago, in a report to the Glasgow authorities on unemployment, Robert Owen, the father of British co-operation, said:—

Men have not yet been trained in principles which will permit them to act in union, except to defend themselves or destroy others.

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For self-preservation they were early compelled to unite for these purposes in war.

A necessity, however, equally powerful will now compel men to be trained to act together to create and conserve, that in like manner they may preserve life in peace.

Nothing is so likely to lead to something like union of action for the general good, and for peace, as recognition of the common need of the community and indeed of nations as consumers.

This can clearly be seen from a study of reports of the various conferences which have been held on the subject of disarmament. Running through the whole of these reports can be seen the fear of each of the nations in conference that a move on their part to disarmament would place them in possible jeopardy with regard to supplies necessary to their people as consumers. The experience in the great war of neutral nations, as well as belligerents, brought to the fore once again the question of the freedom of the seas, and ultimately it is likely that the final and successful argument used in the solution of this problem will be the increasing interdependence of the consumers of the world upon each other, and the absolute necessity of preventing any single power or group of powers from interfering with their free interchange of services.

### V.

#### **Consumers' Needs and Full Employment.**

The recognition and advancement of the case of the consumer will be seen to cover the largest and widest interests of the whole community and, indeed, of the human race. Hitherto we have lived and moved and



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had our being in a society in which greed and self-interest, with comparatively small exception, have been ruling factors. The case of the consumers movement is that human need must come first. In the present order of things this is often the last consideration. Unless by some more or less radical process the case of the consumer can be made to triumph, the outlook is black indeed. It is now regarded only as a truism to say that the problems of production have very largely been solved, but we are only at the beginning of our grapplings with the problem of how to distribute according to human need the results of the abounding developments in production. Every year the potential powers of production per unit of human activity increase, but the needs of the consumer are so widely neglected, and so subordinated to sectional interests, that there is a continuous failure of consumption in relation to the increasing production. Indeed, in many industrial countries the increasing ease with which wealth is produced instead of being a means of raising the general standard of life and culture is, owing to the outstripping of consumption by production, regularly the cause of unemployment, with all the poverty and misery and even demoralisation which that entails. It is to be doubted whether any statesman could be found in any leading industrial country who would not admit that the greatest of his problems is how to secure an increase in the consumption of goods and services to the point of at least an approximate equation to the constant increase in the powers of production.



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This problem is now undoubtedly becoming recognised by the leaders of industry themselves. The tendency to capitalist combination during the last thirty or forty years has been speeded up, and we have added to the terms of "trust" and "combine" the new one of "rationalisation." The World Economic Conference held in association with the League of Nations at Geneva in May, 1927, defined rationalisation as:—

The methods of technique and organisation designed to secure the minimum waste of either effort or material. It includes the scientific organisation of labour, standardisation both of material and products, simplification of processes, and improvements in the system of transport and marketing.

But the origin of the term was in the German word, "rationalisierung," adopted as a description of the process followed in Germany during the war with the objects of rationing output to keep it within the limits of current market demands, and securing a simultaneous reduction in costs. Whilst it is early to pass judgment upon the results of rationalisation, there is sufficient evidence already to show that this process in the hands of the owners of capital will not meet the problem of unemployment, even though it may equate supply to demand in particular industries. The case of the consumer is that unemployment can only be solved by making supplies of goods and services available to all the population whose wants are not yet satisfied, and at a price which brings supplies within their reach. Rationalisation, so far as it has gone, provides little more than an opportunity

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for capitalists to save for themselves profits which are rapidly dwindling because production has outstripped consumption. The old outlook upon this question reveals a widespread belief that there is only a limited market for the product of labour and capital; yet, with masses of the world population remaining submerged below the poverty line, it must be apparent that there is at present no such limitation, except such as lies in the artificial and selfish limitations raised by mankind.

If the consumers' case is properly understood and recognised, and is given its place in the councils of nations, there is at least some hope that self-interest will be so subordinated and made serviceable to the common good, that demand may be maintained not merely in relation to existing production, but to increasing production, and with the satisfaction of this demand there may be produced races and peoples with higher standards of life and of culture, because they are based upon service instead of upon self.

### VI.

#### **Women as Consumers and Voters.**

The future of consumers' direct representation in Parliament, and also upon local government bodies in this country, will undoubtedly be very much affected by the extension of the franchise to women upon the basis of complete equality with men. The women of our nation, and more especially the women of the millions of working-class households, are essentially

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the domestic chancellors of the exchequer. The price of essentials as well as of comforts, the provision of abundant supplies covering alternatives to meet choice and taste, standards of purity, and health factors, are all matters in which women are likely specially to interest themselves, and in which their judgments will be of supreme importance.

Woman's interest in these matters is a common one. There are, of course, fairly large numbers of women, wives and daughters, with husbands or fathers whose incomes are such that whatever their womenfolk may desire or fancy can be obtained for them without considerations of expense. At the same time, quite apart from the millions of working-class women, there are millions more who, for want of a better term, may be described as belonging to the "middle class," and whilst not facing the blast of poverty which meets some of their sex, nevertheless spend their lives in arranging, planning, and fitting in of things because they are subject to a fixed and limited income.

What looks to be a fair competence at the time of marriage often turns out to be an income of bare proportions only, when children arrive to be fed, clothed, educated and started in life, and, with such charges to be met, little opportunity is afforded for providing for old age.

To women in such circumstances there is bound to be an overwhelming interest in the problems of obtaining essential goods at reasonable prices. If this can be said with truth of the middle-class woman,

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how much more forcibly does it apply to the working-class woman? In thousands of cases there is not even a guaranteed income of the most limited amount, and every week sees a struggle to avoid running into debt. Supplies and prices are vital questions, therefore, to the great mass of our womenfolk with limited incomes, and on matters affecting purity of food and health generally, all the women, rich and poor, really should stand together. For example, some years ago in the richest suburbs of New York, epidemic disease was traced to certified milk for which well-to-do people had paid prices which would be prohibitive to the poor. The State took action by ordering *all* milk to be pasteurised, with wonderfully beneficial results to the infant population. In cases of this character the interests of women, rich and poor, are bound up in such a way as to bring new force and direction to efforts for reform by the organisation of their votes.

Woman has had a very long battle for her emancipation, and it is significant to remember that in the co-operative consumers' movement in this country she has always been given equality with men. The training that the co-operative woman member has obtained as to how Government activities, national and local, legislative and administrative, affect her home life and domestic welfare at every point will undoubtedly be of great value in pressing the claims for representation of the consumer in Parliament and upon local government bodies and for legislation in the communal interest. Success in this direction is

probably much nearer than is generally recognised. Bishop Westcott wrote years ago that:—

When a great idea has grown familiar it is not far from accomplishment.

And when it is remembered that the votes of women will actually represent a majority of the electorate, it is not too much to hope that the representation of the consumer will be provided for from now onwards in such an increasing degree as has only previously been contemplated by the pioneers of consumers' co-operation. This, however, will not be achieved without a great deal of education and organisation, for the sectional interests referred to by Dean Burroughs are still rampant.

Emerson wrote, in his essay on politics years ago, that—

Great causes are never tried on their merits, but the case is reduced to particulars to suit the size of the partisans, and it is the case for the consumer that in the long run the meeting of his needs provides the solution of most of the problems that beset humanity, and if this be the case the political interests of sections must give place to the good of the whole.

"War on Ignorance."



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